

Philosophical Journeys

So now where do we go? We have established the rules, tip-toed through thinking, rummaged about the attic of philosophy, run down the steps to the basement of meaning, and finally examined the first floor of a very basic basis of human understanding. Where else but the back yard? You know, that place where you can lounge safely, often behind the boundary of a fence and the comfort of a hammock.

Where theology is rooted in God and mystery, the ultimate root of philosophy is human experience and the ultimate foundation of human experience comes from the shared experience of humanity. One might say that philosophy is in our very soul. It is passed from generation to generation, tinged by the time and situations through which it passes. Are times good? Are times bad? Are the ills human caused or natural disasters? What effect does each generation have on an idea? What nudges or changes of direction become part of the propulsion of an idea?

In the end, ideas survive because they have objective merit outside of the slice of time in which we consider them. Our journey then, is through the human condition.

Western Philosophy Quick Reference

Philosophers	Time	Main concerns
The 'Pre-Socratics'	to 469 BC	How is the world ordered? How is change possible? What is everything made of?
Socrates	469-399 BC	How should one live? Living and knowledge go together. The world is based on objective Forms.
Plato	427-347 BC	Expanded on Socrates. What is knowledge and how is it possible? What is the relationship between mathematical (rational) objects and every day (sensual) objects? Is the world as it appears to be? How should we act within it?
Aristotle	384-322 BC	You name it – and he did.
Early Christians (Apologists)	100-500 AD	What is the nature of God and Humanity? How does God want people to live? What is the nature of the divine order? How can we make God understandable in light of secular (non-Christian – usually Platonic) thought?
Medieval philosophers	500-1200 AD	How can God and his properties be made logically comprehensible? What is the relationship between faith and reason?
Thomas Aquinas, Scholasticism and the Catholic Doctors	1250-1500 AD	How can Aristotle's philosophy be reconciled with Christian doctrine? A resurgence of Ancient texts.

Philosophers	Time	Main concerns
Early Modern / pre-Newtonians	1530-1716 AD	The 'Death' of Scholasticism. How can knowledge be built on new foundations (other than God) that will guarantee truth? What is the relationship between reason and material causation?
Post-Newtonians	1716-1804 AD	What is the relationship between the scientific (Newtonian) picture of the world and the common sense picture?
19th century Moralists / Existentialists	1800-1910 AD	What is the place of humanity and its moral concerns in the wider intellectual landscape, and in the modern State? We know we are the dominant beast but why can't we just get along?
Analytic philosophers	1910-1960 AD	Can all non-scientific problems be dissolved by examining logic and/or language? What is being?
Contemporary philosophers	since ~1960 AD	What is the relationship between the scientific (post-Newtonian) picture of the world and the everyday (moral, social, religious) picture? What is social justice and how can it be increased in the contemporary state? What is the philosophy of everything?

Table 1: Western Philosophical Systems

The Development of Philosophy

When we examine early philosophy, we must keep in mind its theo-philosophical nature. Often knowledge, wisdom and faith are tied together. This is true of many philosophies throughout time but at this time there is a struggle to step beyond mere anthropomorphism or pantheism to understand reality in a more human-centric view.

The Players

Get'cher program heah! Can't know the players without'cher program! We will start out each period with a quick reference of the major thinkers.

Dates	Philosopher	Main Points
Ionians, Italians, Greeks, Orientals		
~625-547	Thales	<i>One thing, an underlying 'spirit' (anima - water) orders everything; the world is 'one'</i>
~610-545	Anaximander	<i>The underlying principle must be 'other' than the things which make it up found through reason</i>
~560-478	Xenophanes	<i>One god, a conscious universe; the 'father' of epistemology</i>
~545-?	Anaximenes	<i>Air is the founding spirit.</i>
~540-480	Heraclitus	<i>Change; everything is transitory except the 'Logos'</i>
~581-507	Pythagoras	<i>Reincarnation. Numbers reveal the order of the universe.</i>
?	Lao Tse	<i>Balance, harmony yin-yang. The underlying principle is unfathomable yet not transcendent.</i>

Table 2: The Early Players

Early Thinking

This lesson is our first foray into the format we will use from here on out. We will discuss thinkers, some concepts, and the ramifications of some of those concepts. So by way of introduction, we can take a moment here and point out some names from the list above. The ones you might easily recognize would be Heraclitus and Pythagoras from the West and Lao Tse from the East. Take a moment and contemplate why you know their names (aside from why you do not know the others). Most of us know Pythagoras because of his theorem and prowess as a mathematician but not so much as a philosopher and Heraclitus because of his famous river metaphor, but not so much a natural scientist and his observations of the natural world which play into later philosophies. What we know and what we think we know are not just two different things but may also be different than the reality.

So it is for our early philosophers. What is the nature of reality, of humans, of the world? Are all things one or are they separate? Are they different but connected? How do we come to know? Is the world a place of laws and predictability or is it completely random? Is what is in front of me real or what is in my head? These questions may seem obvious to us but they were not obvious at that time (and some may still be not obvious!). The early thinkers set about to understand their world and their place in it, so without discussion specific systems or philosophers let us examine some of these basic early ideas.

Something Or Nothing

Is there something or nothing? Seems like a strange question to us but it was a hot topic back then. When I move my arm through the air is there something, some medium, some substance which allows for that movement? If there is something, would that not stop my arm from moving, like a wall in the way? Does nothing imply non-existence? If it does how could there be nothing in between the two point of my arm's movement?

You can begin to see the depth to which this simple question plumbs. We have insight that they did not have, about molecules and such. We know that technically there is something in the way but we are able to push it out of the way because air is not as solid as a wall. They begin to postulate such things but they have no empirical proof. Common sense tells me that I can move my arm, and nothing stops it from happening. But the question is *why*?

Cause And Movement

Whether there is something or nothing, we still observe change. Heraclitus said that you never stand in the same river twice. He understood the linear nature of a river, and he extrapolated that to time as well. We can see how movement implies change. We see a boy become a man. We see the earth change with the seasons. All of this change implies not just *physical* movement but also movements of *state*, that is, change from one state to another, as well. Pretty impressive. Of course he also thought that everything is made of fire.¹

The earlier thinkers pondered on the meaning and the mode of this. If I roll a ball down the bowling alley I observe its movement from point A to point B (and hopefully point B is not the gutter) and I see pins fall when the ball hits them. So I *know* that the ball hitting the pins *caused*

¹ This really makes sense, trust me.

them to fall. I *know* that me throwing the ball *caused* it to roll toward the pins. Basically one begins thinking about cause as a thing in itself. With light I can see, without light I cannot. Is the thing that changed destroyed? Does it remain with the object, but we just cannot see it?

Animal, Mineral, Or Vegetable?

Where do humans fit into the universe? We are obviously different than starfish, but we have hair like dogs. Philosophers will make observations about what makes us *us*. In terms of the other two sections, this is the logical next step for us. No matter how the universe is constructed, we *think*. We are aware that we are our self.

Western Philosophy



Figure 1: Raphael Sanzio, School of Athens, 1509, Vatican

Our pre-Socratics intro now leads us to the more mainstream philosophers. Before we start though, let us set the scene. Picture Athens in its Golden Age; Thinkers are moving from theo-philosophy to philo-theology to philosophy. Art is moving from representation and symbol to realism and sign. Democracy is producing a powerful democratic state as worthy of reckoning as much as the powerful military states.

Most of the folks in the list are heavily influenced (initially) by the Pythagoreans. As with many philosophers, they began there but broke for some reason. Still they are developing new ideas which they are not afraid to share with one another, and in some cases with the next generation of thinkers.

The Players

Dates	Philosopher	Main Points
Greeks (Italians)		
515-450	Parmenides	<i>Step by step arguments – others rely on senses too much</i>
500-428	Anaxagoras	<i>Everything must be in everything else – ‘seeds’; external causes; the ‘Mind’</i>
490-430	Empedocles	<i>Both a priori and a posteriori; ‘opposite’ principles</i>
490-420	Protagoras	<i>Sophism; relativism: truth is in the eye of the beholder</i>
490-430	Zeno of Elea	<i>Paradoxes; ‘reduction ad absurdum’</i>
483-376	Gorgias	<i>Sophist – rhetoric; reality = appearance; knowledge = opinion</i>
? & ~460-?	Leucippus & Democritus	<i>Atomism; movement and nothingness</i>
470-399	Socrates	<i>Socratic Method – ‘birthing’ ideas; ‘Why?’; unity of virtue</i>

Table 3: The 'Pre-Socratics'

Fate

This may seem a strange concept to introduce in a work on philosophy, but Fate, in Greek thought especially, plays a big role. At this time, Fate was not really a philosophical concept but a religious one. Fate is basically the inevitable course of events, that thing which happens no matter what. One can think of Fate as the ‘end of something’ or the ‘purpose’ of something, that is examine it from a *teleological* point of view. Suffice it to say, these guys do not.

The Sophists

Our first players, the Sophists, were a school of thought and teaching which originated with Protagoras (do not confuse him with Pythagoras) but had many exponents. Today we have a pejorative association with this name, mainly thanks to a fellow named Socrates, but it was not always that way. They were an extremely influential group within Greek society.

In general, the Sophists believed that there were always two sides to every argument. They taught an idea which we would call *relativism* – that is everything is relevant to its observer. Truth is *subjective* not *objective*. For Protagoras it is the art of persuasion which determines truth. Gorgias also put forth that the stronger argument basically trumped the weaker argument. He made his living from teaching rhetoric or oratory skills and so better argumentation made right, and if you wanted to be right, hire him.

Before we write this off, consider that in the Sophist’s view, Humanity, not the gods or Fate, is the ‘measure of all things’; of what exists and does not exist. Because of this, things should seem the same to you as they do to me, via our shared humanity. I just understand it better than you, so my job is to persuade you to greater understanding.

Protagoras also felt that even though one opinion was as good as another, people would do what is best (because of laws or social pressure), not just what they felt like doing. In a final note here, Gorgias also taught that laughter was a great tool: “*In contending with adversaries, destroy their seriousness with laughter.*” Good advice in any corner.

PHILOSOPHICAL MOMENT: We end up with two questions here, which we somewhat cover above. First, if everyone’s knowledge/opinions are the same who is right? And secondly, in terms of moral action, who is right? Ponder these for a moment.

The Others

In this section we will look at the non-Sophist pre-Socratics and their contributions to the whole of human thought. You can see from the table above that the list is beginning to grow. The number of people out plying the philosophical shingle is growing rapidly in response to the relative stability of the Greek empire. Leisure time is growing. A wealthier class is growing from the merchant community. No longer is thought and learning the playground of the original privileged class (royalty) but in Athens democracy gives political power to that wealth as well. An educated ruling class becomes the staple of the masses, at least the non-slave, land-holding masses. People, no longer scrounging for their next meal or fleeing invading hordes, hang out in the agora or main plazas and listen to sages. These sages are transforming into teachers, and these teachers are teaching philosophy for a living.

Parmenides bears mentioning here as the guy who decided that *a priori* argumentation was the way to go. What he does is distinguish between our reason and our senses. He believed that we can only know the things which are not changing, because basically, truth relies on objective concepts (*a priori*).

Zeno (*of Elea*), a disciple of Parmenides, wrote mainly to defend his mentor's thoughts, but by doing so introduces a style of argumentation: '*reduction ad absurdum*', which we have mentioned before. He uses it to show the paradoxes within his mentor's detractors' arguments, as well as introducing paradoxes which confound to this day.

Empedocles, saw things somewhat differently. For him, both reason and senses were flawed, but together they did a pretty fair job of getting us through the day. For him, things in reality are paired together for such a purpose. One by itself would be insufficient to give us a clear understanding of things. These opposites or pairs were *complimentary*. In addition, he did postulate a theory of evolution where the best adapted are the ones who survive.

Anaxagoras was very curious and very *scientific* in his approach to things. He is notable for looking at things and trying to understand how something can be at the same time 'of itself' (an apple) and 'of something else' (me, after I eat the apple). He also wonders in the same vein, things like how does a thing like hair (a thing in itself) come from me (a different thing). Based on Parmenides idea that nothing can be created or destroyed, he solves the problem by stating that within everything is a share of everything else. These 'seeds' as he calls them were separated by a force called the 'Mind'. We might think of this a God, but that was not what he saw, and it was probably what eventually got him kicked out of Athens.

Finally let us look at Leucippus and Democritus. Most of what we know of Leucippus comes from Democritus, though most of both their works is still fragmentary. Leucippus wrote that nothing is random but is necessity (our one sentence fragment) upon which (fortunately) Democritus expounds a bit. There is something and there is nothing, but even nothing is something. Everything is made up of something which is ultimately indivisible (literally *a-tomos*) and that there is something in the nothing, we just cannot perceive it. They bounce off one another and into our senses. These 'atoms' are not controlled by a force or deity.

The Gist

Okay, let us take a second and talk about overall concepts which are developing in this period. Logic is on the rise and ground rules are being laid by Zeno and Parmenides. Parmenides,

Anaxagoras, Empedocles and Democritus are defining the natural world in a way that we can almost understand. Parmenides tells us that there is something not nothing. Leucippus and Democritus say that there is nothing which is not nothing. The Sophists are telling us, aside from the “I’m okay, you’re okay” thing, that most of life is a confusion which must be cleared up.

The Sophists are probably the best known ‘school’ from this time but one of the other main ‘schools’ is the Pluralists and most of these other thinkers fall into this school. Pluralists, as the name implies, put forth that there is a plurality of things, that is, everything is not ‘one’. The ability to ‘separate’ things, like movement from objects or people from dogs is laying the groundwork for not just a physics we recognize but a broadening of the questions we are able to ask.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Movement is of great concern to these guys. Odd as that may seem, they question back and forth whether it really exists or is a mere illusion. Remember, movement implies change. It gets to the core of the question of permanence. Therefore substance (that which makes a thing a thing) and movement (change within a thing) dominate many of these discussions. Being able to distinguish between an object’s ‘*substance*’ (the things which make it up, make it what it is) and its ‘*accidents*’ (its attributes) and thereby distinguish it from other things is really the heart of this.

What does this mean? For some, no ‘nothingness’ means there can be no movement, because there is no space to move in, therefore no change. Some nothingness means that there is space for movement, but that confuses how things come together and stay together (like people and ice cream). Both ideas call into question our senses and our reason. How we perceive and or know a thing bears heavily on their arguments for and against. Ultimately these questions are really concentrating on what makes things up, what makes them distinguishable from one another and how do they operate together and finally, how do we know.

Another one of the many things we get from this group goes back to our discussion of the Prime Mover. Their ideas like ‘The Mind’ posit a purposeful, external force acting upon the stuff that makes up everything. Others argue a more mechanical nature of things, unguided and random.

Putting It Together

During this period of time, there develops an interesting mix of thoughts on the nature of things. Questions about what we know, what we can know, how can we know it and how does it all fit together are really beginning to take front row seats. For the most part, this is the environment into which Socrates enters and participates. We place more emphasis on Socrates mainly because we have a more broad understanding of his thought as provided for us by the extensive writings of Plato (lucky for Socrates but unlucky for these guys, they or their followers where just plain out-written; Socrates = better press).

Still there is a depth of thought and connection between these guys which I have really not touched on or developed. What we can pull away is the idea that Sophists pretty much saw the world in a very practical way, and that your brain and your ability to argue is your ticket around. Second, the others were not a group, like the Pythagoreans or the Sophists. They were mainly

individuals or becoming more individual. Not that they did not consult or question one another, but they were postulating as individuals, not for lifestyles per se but espousing critical thinking in those around them.

They were also responsible for the development of styles of logic and argumentation which are still in force. The formulation of logic and logical systems really begins to develop and blossom during this period, as well as many ideas, such as the 'seeds'/atoms or survival of the fittest.

"Whoa, Sam Gamgee, your legs are too short, so use your head!"

J.R.R Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*.